

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as shown in the following listing of all claims:

1. (Canceled)
2. (Canceled)
3. (Canceled)
4. (Canceled)
5. (Canceled)
6. (Canceled)
7. (Currently amended) The apparatus according to ~~claim 4~~ claim 12, wherein the roll (9) and the cutting means (10) are positioned upstream of a film transporting surface (17) designed to convey the film close to the preforming means (8).
8. (Currently amended) The apparatus according to claim 7, wherein the transporting surface comprises an endless belt (17) trained around at least one pair of rollers (18, 19), of which at least one is motor driven in synchrony with the preforming means (8); the cutting means (10) being positioned at the end of the belt (17) furthest away from the preforming means (8).
9. (Currently amended) The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the cutting means (10) comprise a circular knife (10e) interposed between a first pair of rollers (20, 21), that feed the film from the roll (9) and are located upstream of the knife (10e), and the end of the belt (17), which is equipped with a film gripping roller (23) that faces the end of the belt (17).

10. (Currently amended) The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the unit (42) for stably joining ~~the free~~ the leading ends (1a, 1b) of the film length (4) comprises means (24) for sealing ~~the free~~ the leading ends (1a, 1b), located under the preforming means (8).

11. (Currently amended) The apparatus according to claim 10, wherein the sealing means (24) comprise:

a first, fixed sealing plate (25) positioned under the preforming means (8) at the vertical axis (Z) passing through the center of the preforming means (8);

means (26) for generating a vacuum, acting on the first plate (25) and designed to retain the end (1b) while the rest of the film length (4) is being wound;

a second contact plate (27), facing the first plate (25) and mobile between an idle position, in which it is away from the first plate (25), and a sealing position in which the second plate (27) is in contact with the first plate (25) after the two ends (1a, 1b) of the film length (4) have overlapped.

12. (New) An apparatus for making a tubular length of stretch film, the apparatus being applicable to machines or lines for making packages containing groups of products wrapped with stretch film, and comprising:

a feed table, extending in a defined direction, on which the groups of products presenting a front face are formed;

a station for making the packages, located on the feed table and being equipped with means for unwinding the stretch film and forming the length of the film around package preforming means, located on the feed table and being mobile between several working positions in order to stretch the length of film for obtaining a cross section of the length of film larger than the front face of the group of products, thus

enabling the group of products to be fed into the station and, after the package has been formed, to be fed out onto the feed table again;

wherein the means for unwinding and forming the film length comprise:

a roll of stretch film located near the means for preforming the package;

means for cutting a length of the film unwound from the roll and located upstream of the preforming means;

a telescopic unit comprising:

an actuating arm pivoted at its lower end to a fixed supporting structure for swinging about a vertical axis coinciding with a line passing through the center of the preforming means;

a rod slidably housed inside the arm and equipped at its upper free end with a gripper that holds a leading end of the film; the rod being mobile between several working positions from a withdrawn position in which the rod is inside the actuating arm, keeping the gripper outside it, and an advanced position in which the rod forms an extension of the arm;

synchronized drive means being provided to act on the arm and on the rod for pulling the film being held by the gripper along a ring shaped path around the preforming means;

the means for unwinding and forming the film length further comprising a unit, located close to the preforming means, for stably joining leading ends of the film together to form the length of film into a tubular shape around the preforming means.

13. (New) An apparatus for making a tubular length of stretch film, the apparatus being applicable to machines or lines for making packages containing groups of products wrapped with stretch film, and comprising:

a feed table, extending in a defined direction, on which the groups of products presenting a front face are formed;

a station for making the packages, located on the feed table and being equipped with means for unwinding the stretch film and forming the length of the film around package preforming means, located on the feed table and being mobile between several working positions in order to stretch the length of film for obtaining a cross section of the length of film larger than the front face of the group of products, thus enabling the group of products to be fed into the station and, after the package has been formed, to be fed out onto the feed table again;

wherein the means for unwinding and forming the film length comprise:

a roll of stretch film located near the means for preforming the package;

means for cutting a length of the film unwound from the roll and located upstream of the preforming means;

two telescopic units each comprising:

an actuating arm pivoted at its lower end to a fixed supporting structure for swinging about a vertical axis coinciding with a line passing through the center of the preforming means;

a rod slidably housed inside the arm and equipped at its upper free end with a gripper that holds a leading end of the film; the rod being mobile between several working positions from a withdrawn position in which the rod is inside the actuating arm, keeping the gripper outside it, and an advanced position in which the rod forms an extension of the arm;

synchronized drive means being provided to act on at least one of the arms and on at least one of the rods for pulling the film being held on both sides by the grippers along a ring shaped path around the preforming means;

the means for unwinding and forming the film length further comprising a unit, located close to the preforming means, for stably joining leading ends of the film together to form the length of film into a tubular shape around the preforming means.

14. (New) The apparatus according to claim 13, wherein the roll and the cutting means are positioned upstream of a film transporting surface designed to convey the film close to the preforming means.

15. (New) The apparatus according to claim 14, wherein the transporting surface comprises an endless belt trained around at least one pair of rollers, of which at least one is motor driven in synchrony with the preforming means; the cutting means being positioned at the end of the belt furthest away from the preforming means.

16. (New) The apparatus according to claim 15, wherein the cutting means comprise a circular knife interposed between a first pair of rollers, that feed the film from the roll and are located upstream of the knife, and the end of the belt, which is equipped with a film gripping roller that faces the end of the belt.

17. (New) The apparatus according to claim 13, wherein the unit for stably joining the leading ends of the film length comprises means for sealing the leading ends, located under the preforming means.

18. (New) The apparatus according to claim 17, wherein the sealing means comprise:
a first, fixed sealing plate positioned under the preforming means at the vertical axis passing through the center of the preforming means;

means for generating a vacuum, acting on the first plate and designed to retain the end while the rest of the film length is being wound;

a second contact plate, facing the first plate and mobile between an idle position, in which it is away from the first plate, and a sealing position in which the second plate is in contact with the first plate after the two ends of the film length have overlapped.